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RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 6041
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 7553
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NEW DELHI 000538

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DEPT FOR EEB DAS DHENGEL, JEIGHMIE, PHAYMOND; DEPT OF ENERGY FOR A/S KHARBERT, TCUTLER, GBISCONTI

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PINR ENRG FPET IR PK IS CH IN

SUBJECT: IRANIAN SPOKESPERSON SOUNDS OFF IN NEW DELHI ON IPI AND INDO-ISRAELI RELATIONS

REF: A. NEW DELHI 388

- B. NEW DELHI 401
- C. NEW DELHI 323
- D. 2007 NEW DELHI 2148
- E. 2007 NEW DELHI 4574
- F. 2007 NEW DELHI 3639
- G. 2007 NEW DELHI 3084

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Classified By: PolCouns Ted Osius for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Syed Mohammad Ali Hosseini visited New Delhi February 11-13, reportedly to encourage Indian interaction with Iranian media. Hosseini, however, did not miss the opportunity to publicly urge the Indians to expedite the proposed Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) natural gas pipeline deal, to chastise India for maintaining friendly relations with Israel, and to meet with government officials unrelated to public affairs. While India has sent Foreign Minister Mukherjee, Foreign Secretary Menon and Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas Minister Deora to Iran over the past year, it has so far managed to put off Iran's invitation to Prime Minister Singh, signaling that India wants to keep its relationship with Iran low key. The MPNG continues to put off further talks on energy deals with Iran and remains highly skeptical of the Iranian regime's reliability as a commercial partner for expensive, long-term agreements. END SUMMARY.

IPC Pipeline? - Adding China to the Mix

12. (C) Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Syed Mohammad Ali Hosseini told reporters in New Delhi February 13 that time was running out on the IPI natural gas pipeline deal, and that there was "serious determination among the three nations to realize the project as soon as possible." In an

apparent bid to exert further pressure on India, Hosseini hinted that China could replace India as a partner in the deal, stating to the press February 12 that "China is applying pressure and wants to join the project." Hosseini softened his approach the next day, clarifying to "The Hindu" that Iran would not involve a fourth country "for the time being," but wanted New Delhi and Islamabad to resolve their differences quickly.

Don't Get Too Friendly with Israel

¶3. (C) Following up on comments made one week earlier by Iran's Ambassador to India (reftel A) complaining that the Indians had launched an Israeli satellite in order to spy on Iran, Hosseini told the Leftist "Asian Age" that Indo-Israeli ties were harmful to the cause of Palestine, and that the promotion of relations with "the Zionist regime does not support Palestinian rights." Hosseini acknowledged that it was up to India to decide whether to maintain a relationship with any other party, but warned against engaging "a people guilty of committing crimes in the past."

A Failed Attempt to Meet Deora?

¶4. (C) Though Hosseini's visit was publicly labeled an "exchange of media" delegation, Sandeep Dikshit, Defense Correspondent for "The Hindu," told Emboff that Hosseini attempted to meet Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas (MPNG) Minister Murli Deora, National Security Advisor M.K. Narayanan and External Affairs Minister of State E. Ahamed. Instead, Hosseini had to make due with meeting his counterpart, Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) Spokesman

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Navtej Sarna, MEA Joint Secretary for Iran, T.C.A. Raghavan, Information and Broadcasting (IB) Minister Priya Ranjan Dasmunsi, and the IB Director General of Media and Communications Deepak Sandhu, according to Dikshit.

The Media Angle

¶5. (C) Although the issue of media exchanges between Iran and India was reportedly Hosseini's purpose for visiting New Delhi, there was very little press on the subject. One article, deeply hidden in the pages of "The Hindu" February 14, stated that Hosseini conveyed to Dasmunsi February 13 that five Iranian news agencies were ready for cooperation with India, and proposed deepening media interaction between India and Iran. According to the press, Hosseini told Dasmunsi that an existing arrangement with the Press Trust of India could be extended, and Dasmunsi promised to take up the issue with the IB Ministry.

Comment: Hosseini's Real Agenda?

¶6. (C) Comment: Thinly disguised as a "media exchange" visit, some observers feel Hosseini was sent to water down the Iranian Ambassador's comments last week accusing India of using the Israeli satellite to spy on Iran. Others suggest that Hosseini's true agenda was to pressure the Indians on the IPI. Consistent with past Iranian visits, the MEA has kept this visit very quiet, making no public statements on it and turning down requests for comments from Poloffs.

India Keeps Visit Exchanges with Iran Low Key

¶7. (C) Comment continued: Since February 2007, External Affairs Minister Mukherjee, Foreign Secretary Menon and MPNG Minister Deora have all visited Iran, and Iran has had

three official visits in India. Though India's visitors have been somewhat high-level, foreign ministry contacts regularly point out that PM Singh has avoided visiting Tehran so far despite invitations by President Ahmadinejad, a deliberate signal that the Government of India (GOI) is focused on keeping its visits to Iran low key. Press contacts have told Emboff that FM Mukherjee was scheduled to visit Tehran this week, but called it off in January. Mukherjee may be putting off an official visit until the next India-Iran Joint Commission meeting, which observers expect will be in July, though dates are not yet finalized. Rumors are circulating in New Delhi that PM Singh will visit Tehran sometime before national elections in a bid to appease the Left and Muslim voters, which criticizes the current government for keeping Iran an arm's length away in order to please the U.S. Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) Professor P.R. Kumaraswamy argued to Poloff February 13 what Post has heard before from Indian analysts - that the more pressure the U.S. puts on India vis--vis Iran, the more difficult it is for the GOI to manage criticism from its domestic Left constituencies. Post notes that "don't pressure us" is a common theme we hear from our contacts - both inside and outside of the GOI - on every contentious issue. End comment.

¶8. (C) COMMENT continued: Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas (MPNG) Minister Murli Deora's April 26, 2007 visit to Tehran (Ref D) was an unscheduled stopover during his trip to the Middle East and had yielded no progress on the IPI pipeline or the India-Iran liquefied natural gas agreement. Since then, India's chief negotiator on the IPI pipeline, MPNG Secretary

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Srinivasan briefed Embassy on the "fruitless" trilateral round of talks held in New Delhi June 27-29, 2007 (refs F,G). Moreover, Deora and Srinivasan snubbed Iran's invitation for trilateral talks in Tehran for September 24-25 (ref E), and most recently declined invitations for talks in January and February 2008 (refs B,C). The MPNG would likely balance Tehran's recent warning of overtures to China for an Iran-Pakistan-China natural gas alternative pipeline to the proposed IPI pipeline against the following considerations:
-- the huge distance (about 4,000 miles) and forbidding terrain for a pipeline via Pakistan via the Karakorum Highway, Kashmir Mountains, and Xinjiang to distant Chinese consumption centers;
-- problems of negotiating transit fees across Pakistan and ensuring pipeline security through Baluchistan; and
-- Iranian vacillation on price setting and guarantees of sufficient long-term natural gas volumes to justify the cost of the IPI pipeline, much less one reaching China's consumption centers. End comment.

List of 2007-2008 Important Official Visit Exchanges between Iran and India

¶9. (U) Following is a run-down of important official visit exchanges between Iran and India since February 2007:

-- February 6-7, 2007: In his first visit to Iran since becoming External Affairs Minister, Mukherjee visited Iran upon the invitation of Iranian Foreign Minister (FM) Mottaki.

-- April 25-26, 2007: MPNG Minister Deora met his counterpart, Iranian Oil Minister Kazem Vaziri Hamaneh in

Iran on an unscheduled stopover.

-- September 6-7, 2007: Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Mehdi Safari called upon FM Mukherjee in New Delhi to discuss bilateral issues and brief the GOI on recent discussions Iran had with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

-- November 7-9, 2007: Iranian Home Minister Mostafa Pour Mohammadi visited New Delhi to participate in the Second Asian Ministerial Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction.

-- December 16-17, 2007: Foreign Secretary Menon visited his counterpart FM Mottaki in Tehran for bilateral meetings.

-- January 15-19, 2008: Iranian Minister for Economic Affairs and Finance, Danish Jafri, met MPNG Minister Deora and Iranian Deputy Minister for Cultural Heritage and Tourism Hossein Jafari met his Indian counterpart Ambiak Soni in New Delhi.

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